

Families Across Borders—Prevalence and Characteristics of Transnational Families in Malmö

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Abstract *This exploratory study examines transnational family (TNF) relations in Malmö and offers one of the first quantitative insights into this phenomenon in Sweden. Despite data limitations, the findings point to several important patterns. Nearly half of all respondents report having family members abroad, indicating that transnational ties constitute a substantial part of Malmö's family landscape. These ties are most common among the foreign-born population but are also present among second-generation and Swedish-born residents, suggesting that TNF relations extend beyond migration-driven family separation. Almost one third of Malmö residents maintain frequent cross-border contact, which, in light of existing research, likely involves emotional and practical caregiving. The data further suggests a temporal dimension: more recent arrivals report higher levels of transnational ties than long-term residents. Taken together, the results demonstrate that transnational family life is widespread, varied, and significant in Malmö, underscoring the need for further, especially longitudinal, research.*

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of individuals live their family life across borders. People move to another country for protection, work, studies, or for marriage or lifestyle choices, while family members stay behind - voluntarily or involuntarily, impacted by immigration regulations, labour market regulations or personal preference. Despite often long-distance and long-term physical separation, many families maintain a sense of familyhood across borders. This process—which can also be described as 'doing family' across borders—is often nurtured through communication, sharing memories/joint remembrance, or the exchange of care across borders, and often results in the building and transmitting of identities, the nurturing and transmitting of the family language, and the welfare/well-being of family members. Social scientists refer to such families as 'transnational families'.¹

Transnational families are a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon. While increasingly common—due on the one hand to the ease of travel and communication, and on the other to increasingly restrictive immigration regulations—their experiences of transnational family life can differ significantly. For example, their migration—i.e., their reason for family separation—can be temporary or long-term, voluntary or coerced. Also, the family constellations can look differently depending on who migrated and who stayed. Further, there might be care needs in the family and the extent to which the surrounding welfare state can meet those care needs can vary. Immigration regulations can allow family members to visit each other or they can inhibit any physical contact. Moreover, the social markers of the family members abroad and stayed-behind as well as cultural norms can impact the way familyhood is maintained, and, specifically, which memories are shared or who provides care. Experiences of transnational family life can also differ depending on whether the family language is maintained, spoken in the family and transmitted to the next generation. Finally, the constellations of transnational families and what is shared, maintained and exchanged can change over time and over generations.

The field of transnational family studies has been burgeoning in the past two decades. The exchange of care across borders has been by far the most dominantly examined aspect of transnational family life, often with a focus on the care provided by the migrant middle-generation to children and the elderly that stayed behind. These family

members are often located in countries with weak welfare states where family care is a vital source of their welfare. Most of this research has looked at families separated due to labour migration, to some extent those divided following refugee migration and migration for the purpose of education. Furthermore, there is considerable work done on the sharing of memories to maintain familyhood across borders. Methodologically, most studies have used a qualitative approach, with a focus on family members in the country of destination. Due to a lack of reliable statistical data on migration or care practices stretching the boundaries of nation states quantitative insights are much less common. This leads to a situation where generalisations are scarce and cross-country contexts difficult to compare.² As a result, while we have rich insights into the lives of families spread across borders, questions related to the prevalence and further characteristics of transnational families remain poorly understood.

In Sweden, academic engagement with the phenomenon has been fragmented and somewhat limited, and there is a general lack of awareness of the existence of transnational families in public and political debates.³ Broadly, the following issues have been studied: the efforts and strategies to maintaining transnational family ties,⁴ parenting practices,⁵ care obligations and arrangements,⁶ the care practices of the young generation in transnational families⁷ as well as, to a limited extent, the social services' efforts to include the distant parents in their work with unaccompanied minors.⁸ As a result, there is still only little understanding of how Sweden-based residents with family abroad experience family life across borders, and what temporal, practical, financial, or emotional efforts they invest in maintaining a sense of familyhood at a distance.

This article adds to this literature by shedding light on the prevalence of families that live across borders of which at least one family member is a resident of Malmö. Through the Diversity & Inclusion Survey (see below) further characteristics are explored.

MALMÖ AS A SITE OF INQUIRY

With more than half of its 362,000 inhabitants (58%) either born abroad or having one or two foreign-born parents, Malmö might be Sweden's most ethnically diverse city. The group of foreign-born shows considerable diversity, for example regarding religious affiliation, reason for migration⁹ and country of birth. In 2024, the largest foreign-born groups in Malmö came from Iraq, Syria, Denmark, Yugoslavia, Poland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iran, each ranging from approximately 12,000 to 4,000 individuals.¹⁰ Numbers for emigration are missing on the municipal level, but numbers for Sweden provide some indication of the phenomenon: In 2022, an estimated total of 685,000 Swedish nationals lived abroad. This is an increase of 35,000 since 2015. While they live in almost all countries around the globe, the majority (62%) emigrated to other European countries, among them Spain (104,000) and Great Britain (100,000). The US tops the list with the number of Swedish nationals abroad (179,000).¹¹ Many of them have close family members back home in Sweden which, as previous studies have shown, often impacts on mobility and migration decisions (visits, or return migration).¹²

THE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION SURVEY

Our study relies on the Diversity and Inclusion Survey, conducted by the Malmö Institute for Migration Studies (MIM) in the city of Malmö during spring 2025. As mentioned in the Introduction to this special issue, the survey relies on register data but asks additional questions on the diversification of Malmö's population. In this article, we refer mainly to data obtained through the following two questions "Do you have family abroad? - Yes/no" and "How often are you in contact? - Daily, weekly, monthly, never". The data was then explored through a series of cross-tabulations with relevant variables, including migration background—foreign born, second generation (i.e., Sweden born with at least one foreign-born parent), and Swedish/Swedish (i.e., Sweden born with to Sweden

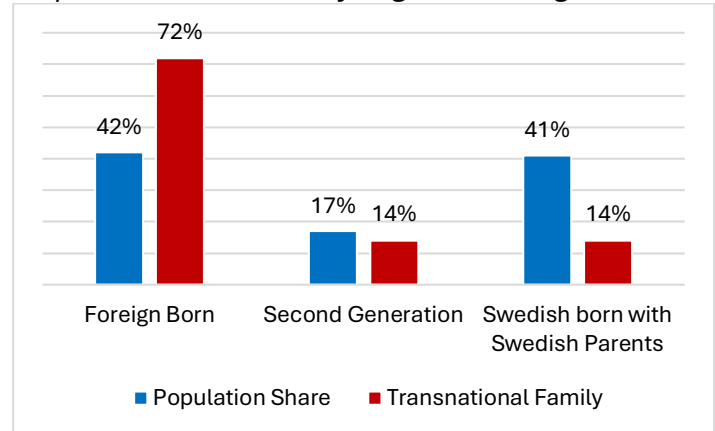
born parents)—gender, age, number of children, marital status, length of residence in Sweden, and the use of language at home. Concerning migration background, the composition in the sample (n=30,078) consisted of 42% foreign-born, 41% Swedish/Swedish and 17% second generation.

A few words on the data: Given the way the main questions were formulated, we cannot know how respondents understood “family” or “contact.” Consequently, we do not know precisely to whom those who answered “yes” to having family members abroad were referring to. Similarly, we do not know how those who are in contact with their family members maintain this contact (digital communication apps, phone calls, parcels, physical visits) or the reason for the stated frequency of contact (emotional needs, financial support, organization of practical support or care, etc.). Taking these limitations into account, the data nevertheless provides a rough indication of the prevalence of transnational families in Malmö and offers informed insights into further characteristics.

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES IN MALMÖ

We begin by describing the overall prevalence of transnational family ties in the sample. Respondents were asked whether they have at least one family member living abroad. Overall, nearly half of respondents (46%) report having a family member residing outside Sweden. Considering the large share of Malmö residents who were either born abroad or have at least one foreign-born parent (58%), this figure may appear somehow low, and future research should clarify whether our somewhat low result is subject to the respondents’ narrow interpretation of family or whether (and if yes, why) family ties were ceased to be maintained or exist over time. Nevertheless, we take this figure to indicate that transnational family connections make up a substantial part of Malmö’s family landscape. Among the respondents that reported family members abroad, close to three quarters were foreign-born (72%), while the remaining quarter was split equally between second generation and Swedish/Swedish population (14% each) (see figure 1). Importantly, we did not find any group-level differences in reports of having family members across borders. This means that respondents of different genders, ages (18+), and parental statuses reported family ties abroad with similar frequency.

Figure 1. Population Share and Share Among Respondents with TNFs, by Migration Background



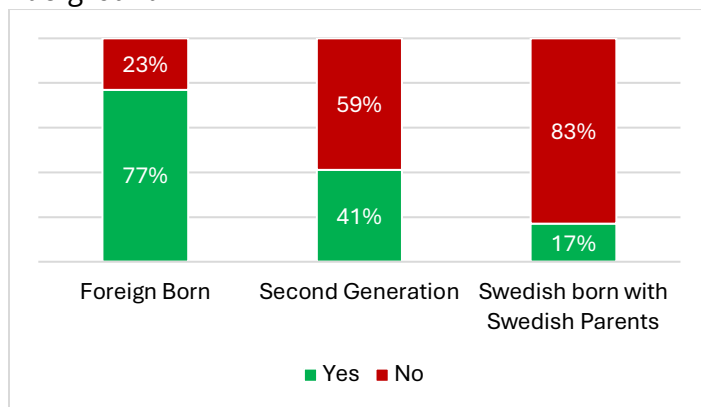
As discussed above, we do not know whether those who answered “yes” to having family members abroad were referring to one or several people and whether they referred to close family members, such as parents or children, or more distant relatives, such as aunts, uncles, siblings, or cousins. Also, we do not know whether in-laws were included. Interestingly, when checking for marital status, we found a slight difference in that a bit more than half of all married individuals (52%) reported having a family member living abroad, compared with 43% of unmarried respondents. Although not conclusive, this may imply that some respondents considered their in-laws when answering this question.

Migration background

Next, we explored the variation in transnational family ties by migration background. As shown in figure 2, foreign-born respondents are the most likely to report having family members living abroad, with over three-quarters of Malmö resident who are born abroad (77%) reporting at least one family member residing outside Sweden. The

prevalence of transnational family members drops when looking at the second generation with less than half of this group reporting family members abroad (41%). Finally, we can see that only one-fifth of Swedish/Swedish respondents (17%) reported transnational family members. While the prevalence is considerably lower among both Swedish-born groups, the mere presence of transnational ties in these groups indicate that the phenomenon of transnational families is not exclusively confined to first-generation immigrants. Instead, transmission of transnational family ties to descendants and/or family ties due to emigration seem to exist as well.

Figure 2. Family Members Abroad and Migration Background

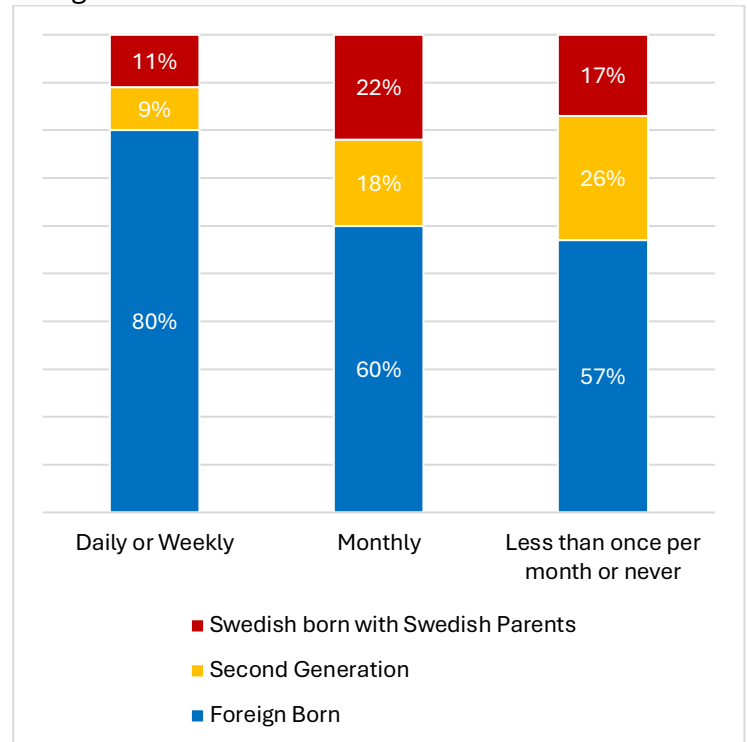


Frequency of contact

Furthermore, our analysis shows that Malmö residents with family ties abroad have relatively frequent contact. More than half of the respondents that answered that they have a family member abroad (57%) reported daily or weekly contact, while roughly every fifth respondent (18%) said that they have monthly contact. Almost one fourth of the respondents (25%) said that they contact their transnational family members less than once per month or never. The foreign-born population does not only show the highest share of transnational family ties, they are also overrepresented among the respondents who have frequent contact, with four out of five of them reporting daily or weekly contact (80%), see figure 3. While, as discussed above, the data lacks further details about the

nature of the contact (how it takes place, why, initiated by whom), it nevertheless allows for a qualified assumption that a considerable share—almost 27%—of all Malmö residents invest substantial time and effort in maintaining contact with family members living in another country.

Figure 3. Frequency of Contact and Migration Background

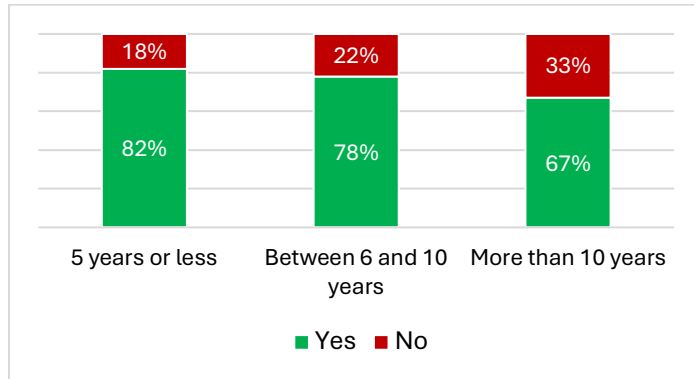


Length of residence

Next, we examined differences in transnational family ties by length of residence in Sweden. Respondents were divided in three groups based on the duration of stay in Sweden. As shown in Figure 4, respondents who arrived in Sweden most recently (0–5 years) were the most likely to report having a family member abroad (82%). Among those who had been in Sweden for 6–10 years, this share was slightly lower (78%), to further decrease to 67% for those who have lived in Sweden for more than 10 years. As our data is not tracking individuals over time, we cannot conclusively assess the temporal development of such ties. However, the result points at time having an impact on

transnational family dynamics, something that has been highlighted by previous research.¹³

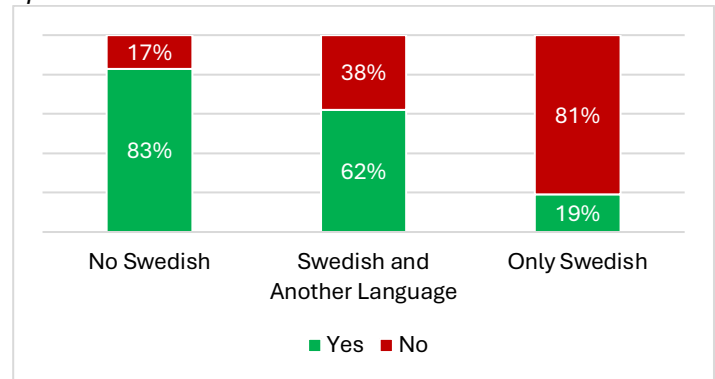
Figure 4. Family Members Abroad and Length of Residence



Languages Spoken at Home

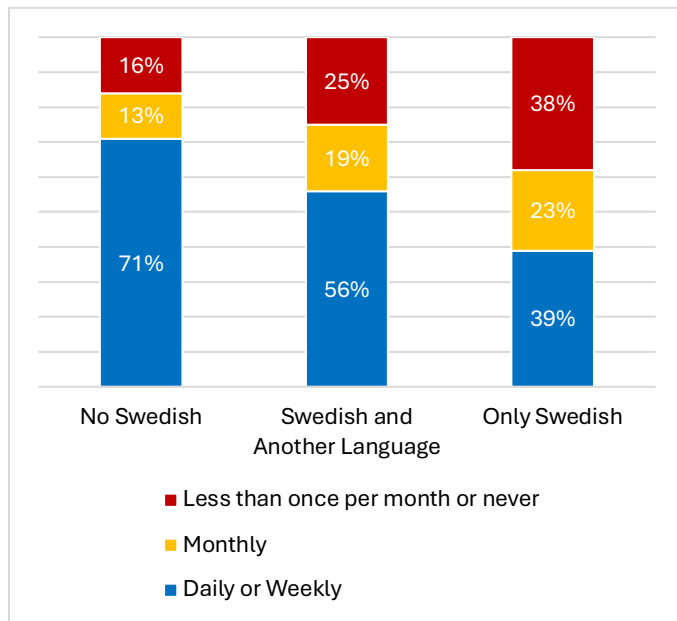
Finally, we explored the data regarding the use of language(s) spoken at home among all respondents. Figure 5 shows that more than 80% of respondents that reported that they don't speak any Swedish at home have a family member living abroad. While this result does not cause any surprises among scholars of transnational family studies, it gets more interesting when considering that 20% of all respondents that do not speak Swedish at home, do not report family abroad, as this might be due to the ceasing of transnational family ties, which is an underresearched aspect in the field. When respondents report the presence of another language in combination with Swedish being spoken at home, the amount of people reporting a transnational family member drops to a bit more than 60%. And finally, we can see that one out of every fifth respondent (19%) that reported only speaking Swedish at home report has a transnational family member. A potential explanation to this could be emigration from Sweden as the reason for family separation, alternatively an assimilation into Swedish as the home language.

Figure 5. Family Members Abroad and Languages Spoken at Home



When further exploring for the frequency of contact, the data also shows a general relationship between the language(s) spoken at home and the frequency in which a respondent contacts their transnational family members. Respondents who don't speak any Swedish at home have the highest frequency of contact with their transnational family members, with more than 70% of these respondents reporting daily or weekly contact. Among the respondents who speak both another language and Swedish at home, more than half (56%) have daily or weekly contact with transnational family members, while two out of every five of the people in transnational families that only speak Swedish at home (39%) reported daily or weekly contact with this family member, see figure 6. Without implying a causal relation, we see that the absence of Swedish spoken in a home increases the frequency of contact with family members abroad. What is interesting here is that a significant number of respondents from homes where individuals speak Swedish exclusively (more than every third) also entertain transnational family ties on a frequent basis, with—and further research should—Swedish as the facilitating language of this contact.

Figure 6. Frequency of Contact and Languages Spoken at Home



WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

This exploratory study highlights several findings regarding transnational family relations in Malmö and points to important issues that warrant further investigation. Given the lack of quantitative research on transnational families—and the overall scarcity of studies on TNFs in Sweden—our aim has been to offer a first step toward addressing some of these knowledge gaps. Despite certain limitations in the data, the survey nevertheless provides valuable indications, including some unexpected results that are well worth highlighting.

First, *nearly half of the respondents report having family members abroad*, which demonstrates that transnational ties form a substantial part of Malmö's family dynamics. While these ties are more common among the foreign-born population, the presence of transnational family members among the second generation and among Swedish-born individuals with two Swedish-born parents suggests that transnational family life may not solely be an immigrant phenomenon but also manifest through the intergenerational transmission of family ties as well as through emigration.

Second, our study shows that roughly one-fourth (27%) inhabitant in Malmö has frequent *contact* with

their family members abroad, either daily or weekly. While the survey results do not allow for more information on these contacts, we know from previous studies that contact between family members often includes the provision of care in various forms, in particular if the family members live in countries characterised by a weak welfare state/strong family care, and in particular if there is a specific care need in the family (illness, disease, accident, young children, elderly care, etc.). We further know that care is circulated, i.e., extended across borders in both directions, suggesting that many Malmö residents do not only organise and provide care across borders but also receive care. The field of transnational family studies has successfully demonstrated that emotional and other forms of care are often extended through the use of ICT (information and communication technology), such as social media apps, and further, that transnational family members often organise practical care for family members in other countries.¹⁴ However, we also know that the inability to travel—due to visa issues, travel costs, political instability or the fear of political repression in the country of origin, or health condition of family members—can be experienced as a barrier to the exchange of care.¹⁵ This leads us to assume that Malmö residents with family members in politically more instable countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan or certain regions of Iraq and those with family members in politically more stable countries, such as Denmark or former Yugoslavian countries, may encounter significant differences in maintaining familyhood across borders.

Third, while individuals living in households where no Swedish is spoken report the highest frequency of contact with their family members abroad, also individuals living in only Swedish-spoken households entertain frequent contacts to family members abroad. While the data does not show this, we speculate that these contacts may be facilitated through Swedish as the mediating *language*, which again could point to emigration as one of the reasons for the formation of transnational family ties. A striking result here is

that one in five respondents (20%) living in households where no Swedish is spoken did *not* report any transnational family ties. While it remains unclear how these respondents interpreted “family” (for example, whether they have no family members abroad at all, or whether they excluded more distant relatives such as aunts, cousins, or siblings), this finding offers an interesting starting point for future research on the dissolution of transnational family ties—an area that the predominantly qualitative research field has so far devoted little attention to.

Fourth, the data indicates a temporal dimension to transnational family relations with more recent arrivals to Sweden reporting higher share of family members abroad than Malmö residents who have arrived in Sweden more than 10 years ago. This points to a decline of family ties over time. However, because this data is not longitudinal, it is difficult to determine whether ties actually weaken after settlement or whether this reflects differences in the groups of respondents (for example, country of origin, age, reason for migration). This also points to a potential path for future research in longitudinally tracking the development of transnational ties for specific groups through a quantitative lens.

Taken together, despite its limitations, our study shows that transnational families are a widespread, important and complex feature of Malmö’s immigrant and native-born populations as well as their descendants. Its results do not only increase awareness of this type of family constellation but also opens to the consideration that informal caregiving which potentially is of crucial importance to the wellbeing of Malmö residents and their family members abroad may be organised across national borders.

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This article is accompanied by a [visualisation](#) that conveys its main message. The visualisation was created by Fanny Olin, BA student in Visual Communication at Malmö University, in collaboration with the authors.

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